

**Chief Thaksin Advisor Now Yingluck's Guru**  
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**By Our Correspondent**

*Pansak Vinyaratn returns from the cold*

Pansak Vinyaratn, the former chief political adviser to ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, has reappeared in the same role for the Pheu Thai government headed by Thaksin's sister Yingluck, according to a government spokesman.

Called "Thaksin's Oracle" in dispatches by US diplomats liberated by the website Wikileaks and "Rasputin" by others, the appointment is even clearer evidence, if any were needed, just how integral to Yingluck's government Thaksin is and appears to be sign of the reassembling of the Thai Rak Thai government in place prior to the 2006 coup.

It is uncertain what effect Pansak's appointment might have. In earlier years, he was close to Sondhi Limthongkul, the Thai publishing tycoon who initially supported Thaksin's government but who broke with the former premier and became the de facto leader of the Yellow Shirts, the People's Alliance for Democracy. The PAD's violent tactics ultimately played a major role in bringing down not only Thaksin's government but two surrogate ones that followed. A onetime newsman, Pansak was the first editor of Asia Times, Sondhi's abortive regional broadsheet daily, which went broke in the wake of the 1997-1998 Asian Financial Crisis.

Pansak has been given a broad portfolio that includes advice and recommendations to the prime minister regarding policies on the economy, public health, social affairs, culture, environment, foreign affairs, legal reforms for development, and administration of justice affairs, a government spokesman said.

Yingluck rules over an uneasy peace that has prevailed since the bloody events of May 2010, when a deadly crackdown on protesters took the lives of more than 90 people, most of them demonstrators, in the center of Bangkok. While there has been calm, there has been no reconciliation.

The magnitude of Yingluck's Pheu Thai Party victory in 2011 elections has largely kept the Yellow Shirts off the streets. But sporadic attempts to find a way to bring Thaksin back from his self-imposed exile without having to serve time after he was convicted of corruption and sentenced to two years in jail have met with upwellings of outrage. That has caused the plans to be abandoned.

Thaksin has nonetheless continued to push for his return from exile, and there have been widespread rumors that he is in the throes of a deal with top Army officials to be allowed to come back. That deal, sources say, would probably preclude his taking an active public political role. In the Cambodian town of Siem Reap on April 14, he held a mass rally to tell his supporters he would return to Thailand in three or four months, possibly on his birthday, July 26. He has made frequent televised broadcasts to followers in Thailand.

The country's legislature has been tiptoeing into the controversial issue of changing the constitution foisted onto the country by the military following the coup. That document

granted amnesty for all military coup leaders, limited the powers of the Senate and made it illegal to publicly criticize the draft document. Any moves to review the 1997 document have been met with threats of extreme violence.

Pansak was said to be behind a wide range of Thaksin's innovative ideas including turning Thailand into Southeast Asia's premier car assembly center, peddling Thai food across the world to reflect the country's culture to the point where Bangkok is called the "kitchen of the world," and seeking to make Bangkok into a fashion capital.

A fervent nationalist, he is also thought to have been responsible for the so-called "OTOP" concept, or 'One Tambon, One Product', a nationwide sustainable development initiative launched in 2001 to promote products made by local artisans through indigenous skills and craftsmanship combined with available local natural resources and raw materials.

Pansak's role, other than as a vehement defender of the fugitive former prime minister, is believed to have been a speechwriter for Thaksin as well, although there were very few news stories even quoting anonymous sources about exactly what role Pansak had. That is no longer the case. He is clearly back. The appointment has been approved by the cabinet and took effect yesterday.

A scrappy, often combative individual, Pansak warred with the Royalist Yellow Shirts, speaking with the US Ambassador to Thailand just days before the September 2006 coup, according to cables liberated from the US State Department by the website Wikileaks, to say that "Efforts to destroy Prime Minister Thaksin represent the decrepit Thai royalist oligarchy's desire to overthrow democracy." In a September 5 meeting with the ambassador, Pansak claimed Thaksin intended to withdraw from politics after the next election, but that his opponents would continue to harass him to try to force him out from office in September - which came true with a vengeance in the form of tanks on the streets..

Pansak derided the Army commander's call for negotiations with militants in southern Thailand and noted the Army was split along political lines. In another meeting just before the coup, he told the ambassador that Thaksin's enemies — and specifically Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda — hoped for his ouster. Prem and his allies, according to the cables, hoped to get rid not only of Thaksin, but also Thailand's democratic system, Pansak asserted. The royalist oligarchy wanted to return to a prior era in which the palace, not democratically elected politicians, would reign supreme.

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